Reading Between the Lines:
A Study of Dialogue in Two British Sitcoms.

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Abstract

This paper analyses whether writers of comedy can give depth and insight into their characters by using dialogue to replace the elements that traditionally enhance the recipients' enjoyment and immersion in the narrative.

To address this question, I chose to use situation comedy as an exemplar of a humorous medium that forgoes backstory, making a comparison of two popular, but different, examples. The process was undertaken by first watching them performed, thereby experiencing the dialogue spoken aloud. This was followed by close reading of the scripts to eliminate any possible enrichment added by the director, set and actors. Finally, the use of the identified techniques and their effect on the audience were studied for commonalities that could be applied to my own work.

The results showed an unexpected sophistication in exchanges of dialogue, even when used in low comedy such as slapstick and farce, to offer insight into the inner thoughts of characters at all levels. Results also revealed that dialogue evolves in response to the development of the narrative and is an effective tool for controlling pace and tension, both of which are essential elements of successful comedy.

This study concludes that since comedy is a highly subjective concept that varies greatly between individuals and over time, the impact of writing formulaically has great influence over success as measured by appeal to a wide audience, over and above its expected lifespan.

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Preface:

When I began my study of dialogue it was with the objective of broadening my depth of knowledge with a view to writing a successful novel for women, using the key elements under an umbrella of humour, since comedy offers a safe space within society from which to witness social transgression. Writer Phoebe Waller-Bridge, when considering whether BBC's *Fleabag* should be a serialized drama or a sitcom, said "I wanted to hide the drama - that had to be the surprise. I knew it had to be comedy" (BrainyQuote.com.) This sums up my ethos for *Broads*, the novel that comprises my creative element.

Firstly, I want to convey depth to my characters by showing, not telling; I "expect characters to speak authentically… to convey things about them which they could not phrase for themselves" (Raban 83). Secondly, I wanted to incorporate humour via individual, near-farcical incidents within the overarching plot, with each day aboard, an episode per se, having a distinct 'happy ending' and still have a successful conclusion at the end of the 'series'. Lastly, I wanted to introduce elements of conflict within a small group without sacrificing the humour I worked so hard to include.

Introduction

I used to laugh watching sitcoms on television. Now I find myself analysing them from the standpoint of a writer. Writing comedy is no laughing matter.

The *Oxford Concise Dictionary* defines sitcoms as "stage-plays of light, amusing and often satirical character, chiefly representing the everyday". They are a staple of British television. As one folds, another takes its place with the result that few stick in the mind unless they achieve 'classic' status, as defined by Wagg as "travelling across time and social space, with an appeal beyond class or age" (2).

Sitcoms may find humour in the misunderstandings, conflict, and routine of the lives of the "middle and lower orders of society whose power is limited" and moreover, whose "manners, behaviour and values are considered by their betters to be trivial and vulgar" (Krutnik 15). Resonating with puns, double *entendres*, misunderstandings and interruptions, they feature exaggerated, eccentric, or disaster-prone characters who struggle in everyday situations. Others base the comedy on ordinary characters in "unexpected, absurd or deviant situations" as discussed by Mills in *The Sitcom* (82). Here, conversations and sentences are cut short, the politeness of turn-taking goes unobserved thus releasing the players from following everyday rules and manners. Though both agree the happy ending is non-negotiable, there are several notable exceptions to this rule.

The success of these transgressions is enhanced by physical performance but fundamentally it is dialogue that instigates humour. It gives insight into the perpetrator and the victim because, as Raban suggests, "in fiction, as in life, our first reaction to people is based on the way they talk" (81). There is a belief that the difference between low and high comedy is the former "evokes unthinking spontaneous laughter via farce and pratfalls to ensure wide audience appeal"; by contrast, high comedy appeals to the intellect, "the complexities of the characters, the plot and elegant wit of a comedy of manners" (Lowers 103). Accordingly, this study will examine the

dialogue of two British sitcoms with seemingly only their popularity and their classic status in common, taking an illustrative example from both categories.

In Chapter One I consider *Dad's Army*, a survivor from the so-called 'Golden Age of Comedy' when a plethora of sitcoms "reflected the social concerns of the day; class, racism and the battle of the sexes" (Reast). It was originally broadcast on the BBC from 1968 to 1977, three years longer than the duration of WWII. With nine series comprising over eighty episodes, it regularly attracted audiences of 18 million viewers, spawned two feature films and a stage show. Despite falling into the sub-genre of visual comedy, the television scripts were successfully adapted for radio (Pertwee 8). The series is still repeated worldwide and is the BBC's standby programme, with an episode always in readiness should a change in the broadcast schedule be required at short notice (www.bbc.co.uk/archive/dadsarmy). In lieu of backstory, writers Jimmy Perry and David Croft use the dialogue of the supporting cast to create a rounded and complex character in Captain Mainwaring. I will consider how this is achieved without detracting from the humour, slowing the pace, or impinging upon the enjoyment of the less discerning viewers.

In Chapter Two, I study the dialogue of Victoria Wood's *dinnerladies*, a romantic comedy broadcast at the turn of the 'minnellium'[2] [sic]. Fully contained within 16 episodes, it may be considered an exemplar of post-alternative comedy and the epitome of Raban's opinion that "dialogue is a medium, not an end in itself", but a tool to convey information about a character indirectly (84)**.** *dinnerladies* demonstrates how a writer breathes life into fictional creations, infuses them with a spark of humour and makes them three-dimensional beings by harnessing the power of dialogue. Using time-tested methods, Wood weaves the plot from trivial gripes and petty disputes; serious subjects – loneliness, bullying, illness, and redundancy – are not exempt. I will be analysing the dialogue to understand the narrative techniques Wood uses to create her principal characters within a comedy scenario, how she gives her secondary characters authenticity, and the function of the ancillary characters. I will also examine how the dialogue develops in depth as the narrative evolves.

In Chapter Three I study the importance of dialogue in introducing the essential element of conflict into comedy. Taking *Dad's Army* as an example I consider the use of casual wartime sexism, examine the role of the unruly woman and the social hierarchy of Walmington-on-Sea. Using *dinnerladies*, I revisit these issues for the post-alternative comedy age, considering whether, a generation later, women are still the second-class citizens of catering, and Dolly Bellfield's snobbery about Mobberley.

Finally, in my conclusion to this study, I will reflect upon how this has influenced the writing process of my own creative work, *Broads*.

Chapter One

Captain George Mainwaring: The Man Beneath the Battledress.

Dad's Army is a character-led series of stand-alone episodes with the absurd situations inevitably resolved at the end of thirty minutes. There is no discernible chronological order, events are not cross-referenced in the characters dialogue and the required happy ending is deferred indefinitely. The audience is introduced afresh to time, theme and setting in the opening credits as an animated sequence of swastika-headed arrows approaches the south-east coast of Britain and is repelled by Union Jacks, to Bud Flanagan's pastiche of a wartime song 'Who do you think you are kidding, Mr Hitler?'. Packed with intertextual references to actual wartime events and bulletins, the programme does not shy from exploring serious issues such as conscientious objection but "the imperative is the comic situation rather than accurate history" (Cullen 203). With a high proportion of farce, superficial reading suggests that *Dad's Army* is low comedy; the humour, dependent upon comedic tropes, is visual and unsophisticated with no purpose except to provoke unthinking, spontaneous laughter. However, closer analysis of the dialogue reveals an unsuspected degree of sophistication in the portrayal of the characters, all of which are there to support the principal protagonist; on the surface a blustering, overbearing man; underneath, a loyal, brave soldier: Captain Mainwaring.

"Permission to interrupt, Sir?": the dialogue of those who populate the microcosm of society in which Captain Mainwaring operates, the respect they show him, what they say, and when.

Culpepper points out that the way in which characters interact with one another reveals "the relative distribution of power between them" and "observing who tends to initiate [interruptions] can suggest who may be dominant, a motivator, compliant or obstructive" (173). Fairness in discourse

entails following unwritten rules such as turn-taking and not starting to talk when someone else is speaking. La France maintains that interrupting "violates both the letter and the spirit of the conversational contract … the occurrence not only affects our assessment of the individuals involved but also confirms their social status" (499).

With the subplot providing the action, the ensemble of supporting characters, in their unsupportive roles, arguably serves to broaden our perspective of Mainwaring. Catchphrases "I'm telling Mum", "We're doomed!" and "Do you think that's wise, Sir?" remain household aphorisms and have featured on a set of stamps. For the casual viewer, the function of secondary characters is conveniently distinguished by identifying catchphrases such as "Put that light out!" and "The vicar's not going to like this". Every episode begins with a parade; inevitably the rank-and-file will be exhorted to "Gather round, men" but Mainwaring will not be able to deliver his lecture – be it regarding enemy plane recognition or care of the feet – without interruption from at least one of his subordinates.

Corporal Jones is renowned for his ability to interject with his experiences under General Kitchener in the Sudan, or to volunteer for whatever action his captain moots. La France considers this "overlapping speech is not sufficient to be considered an interruption" but is "a display of respect for the speaker and a genuine wish to understand their viewpoint" (501). Jones may therefore be deemed an active participant in the lectures; despite a tendency to panic, he is Mainwaring's ally and as such should not be underestimated. The captain's tolerance of these interpositions shows his awareness of this and perhaps explains the stripe on Jonesy's sleeve.

Private Frazer possibly poses the biggest threat to Mainwaring's authority. Appropriately, Frazer occupies the front-and-centre position in the platoon; he is prominent in any disruptive activity. Whilst most interruptions are verbal interjections, in Frazer this also manifests as physical disturbance. Irritable and irreverent, he bursts into the captain's office without knocking and frequently detracts attention from his commanding officer. His derogatory asides on platoon activities appear to conform to the theory that dominant people interrupt as direct acts of insubordination (Robinson 143). The writers allow Mainwaring a single dramatic triumph over the Scot when, contrary to

expectations of the storyline in 'If the Cap Fits'[3] the captain stylishly pipes in the haggis for the Area Command dinner, having "learned on honeymoon because there was nothing else to do".

Mainwaring's relationship with wide-boy Walker is more complex than apparent from cursory examination of the dialogue. The spiv, with his cockney accent and Clark Gable moustache, interjects with impunity using their clandestine transactions – although rarely for the captain's personal use – as a means of leverage. Private Walker's predictable disruption of Mainwaring's lectures with derisive comments may be considered 'heckling', defined by Kádár as "an anti-structive that upsets the social structure of the setting" (Kadar 11). Heckler and heckled are "seeking dominance over the audience", in this instance the platoon, and Mainwaring's immediate retorts could be interpreted as "counter-performance to restore the normal hierarchy" (Kadar 12). Walker may not seek to command, only to amuse.

Mild-mannered Private Godfrey is conceivably an example of reversal theory, the "bringing together of cognitive opposites so they are shown to be aspects of the same identity" (Apter 128). Godfrey serves to illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of Mainwaring's character by making up the other half of a dichotomous pair in synergy with each other. Where Mainwaring's dialogue is self-serving, hard, and abrupt, Godfrey's is self-effacing, soft, and mellow. Stoical Godfrey shows Mainwaring as brash; tasked with the most arduous jobs Godfrey is meekly compliant whereas Mainwaring needs to be coerced. In the episode 'Branded'[4] Godfrey confesses to being a WWI conscientious objector and is ostracised for cowardice. After he saves Mainwaring's life, Godfrey's medals for courage and heroism under fire come to light; he refrains from wearing them for fear of "seeming ostentatious". The human side of the captain peeps through the pomposity when he publicly apologises and reinstates Godfrey as a non-combative medic. Mainwaring is not always so humble, especially when he falters over the intricacies of the 24-hour clock. He attempts to cover these blunders with bluff. "I wondered who would be the first to spot my deliberate mistake. Well done". He fools no-one.

Notably, Mainwaring is the only married man amongst the principal characters and off the parade ground, another facet of his personality is related via their interactions. Always ready and willing to lock horns with the vicar,

when it comes to tangling with the daughter of 'the suffragan Bishop of Clagthorpe' he is more reticent. In a mildly sexist endearment typical of the period setting, he refers to her as "the little woman" but in their infrequent, one-sided telephone conversations, Elizabeth is apt to cut her husband's conversational feet from under him; unexplained black eyes further allude to his being the victim of domestic abuse. For all this, Mainwaring is unprepared to be humbled in front of his men, by his own shortcomings or by dreadful bully, Captain Square. Square insists on mispronouncing Mainwaring's name, probably an intentional slight to undermine his authority[5]. That Mainwaring never reacts or corrects him perhaps illustrates a phlegmatic side to his character that might otherwise go unnoticed.

"There's no chip on my shoulder. I'll tell you what there is though, three pips and don't you forget it"[6]: the gradations of social difference as a source of humour in 70s comedy

Attacks on Mainwaring's authority come primarily from below; nowhere is his insecurity shown more succinctly than in his exchanges with his sergeant, ex public-schoolboy Wilson. Mainwaring, seemingly envious of Wilson's connections, casual charm, and urbane mannerisms, makes every attempt to supress Wilson's superior demeanour and usually fails miserably. In 'A. Wilson (Manager)?'[7] we learn Mainwaring repeatedly blocks his junior's promotion prospects both at the bank and in the Home Guard. Wilson reinforces our impression of Mainwaring's self-importance by accusing his commanding officer of actively courting salutes on the high street and cuts him down to size with scathing commentary on his decision-making. Whilst Mainwaring's dialogue is jingoistic, Wilson provides a more pragmatic evaluation of the world outside the church hall:

> Mainwaring: They'll never get through the Maginot Line.
> Wilson: They haven't. They went around the side.
> Mainwaring: That's a typical shabby Nazi trick![8]

That Wilson is a minor peer and previously enjoyed a 'good war' is grating for Mainwaring who, whilst ostensibly scorning the class system that

gave others an advantage in life, aspires to rise above his own lowly status and join them.

Earlier comedy shows prove there are many laughs to be had at the expense of the officer and it is interesting that when these roles were first penned, the situations of Wilson and Mainwaring were reversed, the monocle-wearing, upper-middle class gent was the commanding officer. It failed to raise a laugh and was rewritten (Lewis).

"I really enjoy this war. And you always spoil it"[9]: the need for a tangible antagonist as a foil in comedy.

Reading between his lines suggests Mainwaring is an innately lonely man with few friends outside the platoon, taking great pains to conceal his working-class background. In an era when successful comedy relies on discrimination, Mainwaring is fiercely patriotic, at times bordering on xenophobic. He praises "our brave boys" and "jolly Jack Tars", berates the French for being overly emotional and smelling of garlic, the Yanks for their tardiness in joining the fight, Eye-ties for opera, and Ruskies for communism and alliance with the enemy. He takes the war as a personal battle and above all, hates Hitler, referring to him as "a tinpot dictator resembling Charlie Chaplin" and wishing in 'Asleep in the Deep'[10] that "he'd have a go – I'm spoiling for a fight".

The ever-present threat of Nazi parachutists notwithstanding, the German forces rarely trouble Mainwaring's patch "between Timothy White's and The Novelty Rock Emporium". Hodges, ARP warden and greengrocer, perpetual thorn in Mainwaring's side, assumes the mantle of the tangible enemy and as such always comes out worse. The running gag is that he usually gets wet, resulting in dialogue is as uncouth as the man himself; derogatory, loud, and peppered with slurs on the platoon's abilities. He refers to Mainwaring as Napoleon, mocking his height and domineering social behaviour. He is the only member of the cast to use 'bad language' usually prefixing his comments with 'ruddy', a euphemism for bloody which in the 1940s was considered very rude. He may be an unlikeable antagonist but is entirely one of Mainwaring's own creation; before the war he turned down

Hodges' loan application to extend his stockroom, believing it would have been used for hoarding, also showing us how pre-judgemental Mainwaring is.

"Some of the women want to join and we think it's a damn fine idea, don't we, Wilson?"[11]: the changing face of comedy in the '80s.

As the golden age declines with the '70s, comedy evolves into a political weapon. The new, 'alternative sitcoms' that come to dominate mainstream comedy are "character-led, improvised, non-racist, non-sexist programmes" that dare to challenge Margaret Thatcher's government (Peters 5). Programmes such as *The Young Ones*, with fast-paced dialogue in sketch format, interspersed with anarchic slapstick, animation, subliminal messages, and a musical interlude ostensibly intend to change British comedy values and inform political discussions. Targeted toward the undergraduate audience, it mostly fails to capture the imaginations of working-class Britons (Schaffer 375). Perhaps its biggest influence was what it put an end to.

Chapter Two.

dinnerladies: The Tabards Come Off.

On British television, alternative comedy is perhaps the vanguard for the steep rise in female participation; women "became the subjects of comedy, creators, rather than objects of humour" (Finney 3). The product of stand-up comedians, the new-and-improved sitcoms include Jennifer Saunders' *Absolutely Fabulous*, Caroline Ahearne's *The Royle Family*, and Victoria Wood's *dinnerladies*. Not content with having their lines read by others, the writers take the principal role in the sitcoms they pen; strong characters with dialogue of their own, not in supporting roles for men. They prove that "the gender of the creator made a difference to the kind of comedy produced" (Finney 1).

Finally, women are funny: not as stereotypes but as flawed human beings, very deliberately unattractive and unabashedly bad at what they do. Arguably, Wood is alone in not stealing the scene in her own sitcom, leaving that accolade to dirty, unkempt, unsexy Petula.

"Oh, fair Brenda of the shepherd's pie"[12]: ordinary characters in everyday situations with dialogue as the new driving force.

dinnerladies stands apart from most other sitcoms in that it is a progressive storyline with each episode reliant upon the last. Set in HDW Components, a fictional factory in Manchester, it takes place entirely in a bare, dated canteen. All human life is here, amongst giant pans and recalcitrant toasters. Nothing much happens. Defining characteristics of high comedy notwithstanding, arguably the humour of *dinnerladies* flows from the episodes not being entirely character or plot led; dialogue drives the narrative, hard.

Wood plays Bren, assistant to manager Tony, alongside prissy Dolly, irascible Jean, ditzy Anita, wild-child Twinkle, volatile maintenance-man Stan and a clutch of minor characters, each one the stoical bearer of life's tribulations. They are beset with personal problems and, despite Jane's statement to the contrary in 'trouble'[13], they bring them all to work. Their

snappy, lively, epigrammatic one-liners crack like whips at the ladies' pristine white trainers and make the characters, imbued with flaws and eccentricities, believable. However, situation comedy is more than the sum of its parts; dialogue alone cannot sustain an audience. Mills observes that "the pleasures of sitcoms oscillate between comic moments and narrative development, both partly reliant on one another" (The Sitcom 139). Neither can form the sole focus of critical engagement.

Wood does not depend on gags alone nor are her characters mere vehicles for dialogue as some other sitcoms would have them. *Fawlty Towers* is devoid of backstory, plot, or development. Although farcical, it was considered high comedy because of the musicality of the dialogue; the characters are of secondary importance, "existing as foils for Basil's self-indulgent incompetence" (Davies 99). There appears to be no need for the audience to empathize with the characters. They are 'comedy gold' but intentionally flat. Feuer suggests that "flat characters take us away from our identification with them, we laugh at them. Rounder, more complex characters allow us to laugh with them" (154). In an intentionally short series, the writer usually has little time for character development. Wood touches upon her technique in *dinnerladies: first helpings* (7). From the concept of a sitcom set in a canteen, she creates an over-arching storyline – the lukewarm love affair of star-crossed lovers Tony and Bren. To keep the audience engaged during an apparent lack of romantic progress, they are surrounded by comedic secondary characters.

It is arguably Wood's flair for creating a reciprocity between the dialogue and the advancement of the relationship that makes the audience realise that something is growing beneath the surface, heightening the tension, and bringing them back for more. This is a timeless technique and, as the characters are charismatic, works. For example, during the first series, the exchanges between the couple are banterous, even when they are alone. As the romance heats up, the dialogue becomes more tender, more intimate. In 'gamble'[14] Tony asks Bren to spend Christmas with him and she queries whether he is asking her for a bet. His reply in the negative has a sincerity that seeds belief because the preceding dialogue lays the groundwork and creates a well-rounded conclusion to the plot.

The extensive use of catchphrases as identifiers is a staple comedic device that "provides a mutually recognisable cultural shorthand for characters and allows the audience to revel in the already known" (Darlington 127). A long-running series such as *Dad's Army* often has casual viewers that watch sporadically and as "it does not matter what happened in the last [episode]" may not be broadcast in a specific order (Grote 63). *dinnerladies* principals Bren and Tony develop with each episode and their storyline is put into perspective, especially in the second series, by a caption of specific dates under the titles to form a timeline. Wood reserves catchphrases for minor characters e.g. the bread man who "fell off a diving board in Guernsey", an insignificant figure with a character-enriching function which I expand upon later. Others had typical traits but no verbal tags. Instead, there is a reliance upon visual humour to deliver the comedic cues. Stan, cone in hand, will march stiff-legged across the stage, priming the viewers for a double-entendre, usually featuring nuts, shafts, and valves, followed by an absurdly implausible achievement by his father, a Desert Rat.

Since Sheridan created Mrs Malaprop, idiomatically related word-play has been a standard tool of the comedy writer, "especially useful for indicating the inferior intellectual ability of a speaker" and Wood is no exception (Fay 507). Bren has a predilection for using the wrong word and dialogue diamonds include, in 'royals'[15], "them things like cucumbers– suffragettes". Wood trusts her audience to get the joke – it is never explained. Bren's dialogue is also used to engage and inform the audience by controlling the pace at which the drama unfolds. In 'gamble'[16] Bren, off-screen, has accompanied Tony to hospital for an oncology appointment and Wood portrays her concern for him in a monologue on an unrelated subject, with Stan as the 'silent recipient'. Barely coherent, Bren's speech is rapid and peppered with non-sequiturs; physical clues and backstory are superfluous to heighten the tension. When Tony and Bren share a chaste kiss under the mistletoe, the audience relaxes; all will be well. Minutes later, likely to have missed the analeptic reference to a wedding ring, their complacency is rocked by the unexpected appearance of Bren's husband, a human catalyst added to an already precarious equation. Having all the information imparted by dialogue – "I wish I'd met you sooner

… before I married an alcoholic" – and thus capable of suppression, makes this an entirely plausible, albeit shocking, twist in the tale.

"I love the factory and as for me mother, well, I love the factory"[17]: the comedic trope and its use as an enriching tool

Wood enlivens the narrative using Bren's disadvantaged, delusional and manipulative mother, Petula, who makes a cameo appearance in 15 episodes; Kamm maintains that "comedy stems from the anticipation of this event" (242). Petula has the best, most improbable dialogue and unreferred-to sight gags that include a phallic keyring and an excrement-stained blanket. Dialogue in 'party'[18] establishes that Bren is illegitimate and was left at an orphanage as an infant – Petula "couldn't jive and push a pram" and never returned, claiming to have "lost the address – we can laugh about it now". This perhaps accounts for Bren's low self-esteem and her inability to distinguish Tony's tentative advances from his smutty badinage with 'little and pretty' women such as Jane. Without recourse to a backstory, arguably Wood is using Bren's dialogue to portray shy quirkiness, anxiety, and social ineptitude. The character's extensive knowledge of film may indicate that Wood has placed her leading lady on the autistic spectrum (www.researchautism.net).

Wood appears to recognise that if every character is larger than life, they compete rather than compliment. Arguably this is why Bren is usually the foil in these brief encounters, "giving the eccentric character a presence to play against" (Kennedy 1). Based upon their similar physical infirmities and a shared admiration of feminist Simone de Beauvoir, I suggest this farcical, low-comedy role is a pastiche of Wood's already established and well-received character, Mrs Overall of *Acorn Antiques*, itself a parody of a soap opera. It was a technique that previously enjoyed success in Wood's 1992 *Christmas Special*.

Petula is unlovable, an awful creature but one with a key role to play in the conclusion of the narrative. She provides the obligatory happy ending in a combination of situational irony and the strategic use of a McGuffin as a literary device that twists the plot once more. In 'monday'[19] Bren is instructed

to "just get rid" of a mobile phone. Seemingly a throwaway comment, it is a pointer to the truth of Petula's nefarious past. Wood follows it with one of the woman's outrageous claims and it goes unremarked. In the final episode, 'toast'[20], Petula's living will bequeaths Bren "a junk of bank notes" and surprises the viewer by subverting their perceptions of the woman and her improbable past. It acts not only to facilitate the necessary happy ending but to tie up the loose ends, an unlikely achievement without this device.

"I didn't know Keith had an Auntie Ivy"[21]: the use of background characters to add realism to the narrative

Background characters may not advance the plot but are included to "establish the density in which the protagonists move" (Culpepper 53). Nearly every character that enters the canteen is rounded, "capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat" (Foster 81). Much the same way as incidents in *Dad's Army,* once an auxiliary character, such as Twinkle's disabled mother or Bren's foundling baby, has served to drive the narrative along, it is discarded without future reference. This is arguably because Wood crams so much into each episode that she needs to cull the superfluous and trust her audience to pick up on the subtleties. This can also explain how *dinnerladies* remains fresh after twenty years. That it is both inclusive and universal is the beauty of this sitcom.

dinnerladies is based upon 'the travail of women' and in Rebecca Front's documentary, Wood describes it as "picking up words and phrases from people who passed through my life" (From Soup to Nuts). This accounts for the realism of her dialogue, uttered by completely plausible characters. Although she was willing to share her secrets of stand-up comedy, Wood is vague about the actual techniques she uses to create this enduring sitcom: "a few months of fannying about … then I finished" (dinnerladies: first helpings 8). Following her demise in 2016, the question remains unanswered.

"Has she told you what a terrible mother I am?"[22]: channelling the dialogue of secondary characters into backstory

Wood uses inimitable dialogue to paint the audience an in-depth picture of her characters. Much can be picked up from the characters themselves. For example, 'monday'[23] serves to set the tone and theme and introduces the primary characters. Tony's opening lines quickly establish his outer persona, his illness, and his managerial style. Wood presents a sarcastic, lonely celibate, abandoned by his wife and in poor health. He is the embodiment of a mock-macho hero, "making a mockery of his masculinity, presenting the male as the object of laughter, not the female as was previously the norm" (Hanke 75). This then is the superficial view of the man: as the story unrolls, Tony's brusque shell cracks, revealing a shy, gentle soul. However radical an advancement from earlier comedy figures this seems, it should be noted that this pastiche of a character is the creation of a woman; that the canteen staff do not take advantage of Tony's inverted power-struggle confirms to Carlson's theory that "even when comic heroines have been created by women there is rarely an easy confluence with power" (2).

To add flesh to the bones, Wood uses the interrelationships of permanent characters with incidentals that have no outcome in the overall scheme of the plot; in 'moods'[24] as each character interacts with their parent, the tabards come off to reveal what lies below; how nurture formed the adult before us. As Godfrey does for Mainwaring, the contrast, or sometimes the similarity, creates an insight into their personalities. Normal everyday conversations are undercut and prevented from proceeding by a verbal interjection of the absurd. The dynamic thus becomes the driver of the scene and dialogue flows naturally from each character in their distinctive voice. Thora Hird, Dora Bryan and Eric Sykes play parents invited to take tea at the canteen in "the tradition of using familiar faces of older character actors in cameo roles" (Mortimer). When Stan's father arrives, he savagely undercuts the foil, in this instance Tony, and stops the conversation completely. This is a common comedic device; however, Wood seems to capitalize on Hird's "impeccable sense of timing" and reputation as a battle-axe (A Tribute to Thora Hird). Enid sustains a tongue-lashing of Phillipa, in a matchless volley

of six put-downs in rapid succession until the hapless woman breaks for cover. During this episode, Dolly is succinctly revealed as a hypocritic; we see her appalled by Enid's merciless bullying yet apparently unaware that it is her own default setting. Her homophobia shines through when she confesses to "constant regret that [her son] Stephen lives with a marine biologist called Marcus. They collect teapots". We can surmise Dolly is a pet name from Enid's pride in her daughter being "dainty, like a little doll" but then "woof – she was like a dinghy with plaits. It weren't puberty, it were pies". These few acerbic words go some way to explaining Dolly's obsession with weight and food.

Wood also uses satire to "mock the weakness, not the persona" of Connie, a caricature in a lurid tracksuit that allows her to "be bare-arsed in seconds" (Singh 68). As her mother flirts and preens, Jean stands demurely in the background, perchance a throwback to a childhood reminiscent of Bren's, when she "cramped [her] mother's style". Connie's wide-eyed, dizzy-blonde promiscuity speaks volumes about Jean's suppressed libido. Later in the narrative arc, liberated by divorce, Jean goes on to indulge in frenzied affairs with unlikely sex-bomb Barry and later with Stan, perhaps foreshadowing she, in contrast to Bren, is her mother's daughter after all.

Wood invokes a sense of irony when chic, efficient Reena whisks through the canteen on a business call. Her role is not as antithesis to Anita's anecdotes of "googly-eyed coat hangers" and "Celine Dion jigsaws" but rather to convey Phillipa's latent racism, which seems indoctrinated by her own mother, Hilary. Hilary is a juggernaut of a woman – brisk, bullying, and bigoted – and probably the reason Phillipa's confidence resides around her ankles. Phillipa habitually introduces herself in full, suffixing her job title; Hilary addresses her as Flip: flippant. Could this be a clue as to why Phillipa migrated from Surrey? Wood calls the effectiveness of this move into question when MD Mr Michael and Phillipa's lover, uses the same moniker.

Only when we meet Jim, the Desert Rat himself, does the real Stan manifest; a brow-beaten, motherless boy with an entrenched contempt for the capability of "female women". Even Bren, whom he hero-worships, is not above scorn. Jim is inherently disagreeable, his single redeeming quality being an ability to "feed fifteen fighting men from a hubcap" – arguably he is the

dichotomy of Petula, who cajoles and flatters for favours. Father and son are jingoistic and stilted in their speech, echoing stiff, military bearing. Wood transposes their gender roles, "making fun out of inflated notions of heroic masculinity" (Karlyn 158). Mothers were invited to tea; Stan, the cock among hens, brings his father as his own mother "ran away with the piano-tuner in 1954". Wood gives Stan's absent mother the power in a failed relationship and the "three times reversal effectively triples the comedic effect" (Finney 12). Stan's dialogue has a rhythm unlike that of any other character, an evocative way of relaying to the audience that beneath the gruff exterior is the heart of a poet. In life, he extolls his father's achievements with an iambic beat; and pens a tribute after the old man's passing; in 'holiday[25]' he writes in syllabic verse:

> … You were strong, you did your best
> Proudly now you lay at rest
> How ashamed I feel it's true
> I did not do more for you …
> Never can I let you see
> just how much you meant to me.
> As a father and a man,
> Bye-bye, Dad, from your son Stan.

As touching as it is, it seems Wood cannot resist the laugh at the end but like Mark Anthony's speech at Caesar's funeral, Stan's use of rhythm and rhetoric moves his audience to introspection over what was a very unlikeable character. It motivates Bren to donate her holiday money to Petula, thus foiling yet another tryst with Tony. Stan's naivety and inexperience with the opposite sex are most apparent by his use of innuendo, especially when approaching "female lavatory areas". He refuses to allow them to perform physical tasks unassisted; Montemurro considers this a sign of immaturity as "boys consider women should feel flattered by being viewed as inferior" (443).

Critic Ben Thompson argues that there is "an uncomfortable suspicion that Wood's much-vaunted flair for the everyday might actually be rooted in contempt rather than sympathy" (Jeffries). All preceding comments notwithstanding, in my opinion, Wood does not impart a sense of mother-shaming, rather an impression that the weakness lies with their adult offspring

failing to realize that they should move on from assigning power over their lives to their parents in perpetuity.

The overlying effect however is that a few carefully chosen words not only paint an accurate picture of what could be a friend or relative but imbue them with that most precious gift; the ability to make people laugh with them.

Chapter Three

Speech: Putting a Stamp on Sex and Status.

Thus far I have touched upon the ability of dialogue to create rounded, believable characters. They are but one element of a successful sitcom: to advance the plot there must be an interrelationship between setting and conflict. Personal or specific conflict is usually transitory and can form the basis of an episode, at the end of which the situation is resolved. Enduring conflict is a clash of interests that has its roots much deeper in the human condition such as politics, class, race, sexuality, and gender. It generally forms the basis of the series. Many are now considered discriminatory and outside the boundaries that humour as an activity can cross. However, sex and status are still acceptable sources of conflict in comedy and for either, dialogue is an invaluable weapon in the arsenal of the writer. Its use reflects the hierarchal structure of a group and provides the means of maintaining that inequality without detracting from the humour. As such, it is an important concept to include. I consider the dialogue of conflict in sitcoms taking *Dad's Army* and *dinnerladies* as my models.

"Watch it, Wilson, you might snap your girdle"[26]: using dialogue of the time as reflective of typical British popular culture and attitude to gender

Casual sexism in government campaigns such as 'Be Like Dad – Keep Mum' succeeded in raising the ire of Labour MP Dr Edith Summerskill who considered the slogans very offensive to women and requested they be withdrawn (www.hansard.parliament.uk). Notwithstanding, Weber is of the opinion that *Dad's Army* "reflected real events, experiences and social attitudes of the time in which it is set" (39). Written by men, about men, it is typical of sitcoms of the era; the female characters are reinforcements to the menfolk as they fight the battle for Blighty (ww.gov.uk/government/news/the-women-of-the-second-world-war). Women are "the unlaughing at which men

laugh" (Finney 2). Their dialogue serves to illustrate them as stereotypes rather than distinct personalities: domineering Mrs Pike, lusty Mrs Fox and hen-pecking Mrs Yateman; sweet old spinsters the Misses Godfrey whose discourse rarely extends beyond the tea-table; Walker's promiscuous arm-candy, Shirley, with a mouth as loose as her morals; shrinking Violet who speaks in whispers. All contribute to "the dissociation of women with humour" (Finney 3). The status of the feminine is further eroded by Frazer eternally rolling his eyes at the thought of "big, strong thighs".

Yet arguably the most compelling female character in the series is the reclusive Elizabeth Mainwaring. A powerful woman who "transgresses normative formulations of womanliness and effeminacy", portrayed as an unruly female as defined by Pavda as "displaying several characteristics: large size; assertiveness; dominance of men; making a spectacle of herself and controlling the dialogue" (25). The triumph of the writers in bringing all these together is significant because it is achieved entirely through the dialogue of others: the woman herself is never seen or heard from the depths of the Anderson shelter. Her build is established visually when the bunkbed – of course, she was on top – sags alarmingly above Captain Mainwaring in 'A Soldier's Farewell[27]'. Her other attributes are illustrated via her husband, usually in conversation with Wilson. In the same episode, Mainwaring procures contraband cheese and telephones his wife, promising her "a surprise tonight, my dear": she slams down the receiver. Unseen, in 'The Godiva Affair[28]' Elizabeth humiliates her husband by riding naked through the town. "Poor Captain Mainwaring," says Jones, "he'll never get over this" at which Frazer quips "Neither will the horse". Elizabeth's reluctance to cede control over conversation is revealed in 'The Big Parade'[29] when we discover she "hasn't visited the cinema since the introduction of talkies". This can be seen as receptive comedy at its best, described as "resonating with the audience and mocking the situation, making them realise the ridiculousness of [it] and laughing as a response (Reast). Unlike Hyacinth Bucket of *Keeping Up Appearances*, who was possibly the forerunner for characters created by Aherne and Saunders, the laughter is never at the expense of Elizabeth as an unruly female arguably because "unseen, she cannot be the butt of a male joke or the object of a man's gaze" (Rowe 6). Philomena Badsey, in her essay

'Women in *Dad's Army'* considers that over the nine series, Mrs Mainwaring's character provides a blank space on to which the audience could project "their opinions about women and marriage, both in WWII and 1968-77, a time of massive social change" (59). In the 2016 cinema remake, the female roles are revised to bring them into line with current political correctness. Whilst the women save the day, just as the shark in *Jaws* loses its menace when it emerges from the depths, the might and majesty of Elizabeth Mainwaring dissipates at her manifestation.

"Men can't whisk. It's the testosterone "[30]: how dialogue reflects the reversal of gender stereotyping at the turn of the century.

The cast of *dinnerladies* is predominantly female but there remains a fleeting glimpse of northern misogyny throughout. The women do not have managerial positions excepting Phillipa and it is implied this is a benefit of her relationship with Mr Michael. Yet under the guise of highly comedic banter there is still a struggle for power among the pots.

Sitcom audiences expect – and get – an element of gender-shaming in comedy. Wood delivers, using Stan who often begins "I've given up expecting a woman to …" and Tony who readily admits to being "lost in the land of No-Speakee-Ladytalk". The men, like Elizabeth Mainwaring before them, retreat to their sheds leaving conflicting opinions as to the intention Wood portrays in her dialogue between the womenfolk.

Giardini & Willek argue that females suppress each other's sexualities via indirect aggression: Dolly's catty remarks and Jean's inferences to "appliances in your underskirt drawer" and "a pelvic floor like a bulldog clip" are commonplace as each attempt to exert control over the other by the "malicious manipulation of sexual reputation using gossip" (313). Conversely, Collinson suggests that mock aggression and incessant teasing is defiance "in the face of the beast of monotony" (182). I believe Wood intended the dialogue to portray the workers attempts at denying boredom and the physical demands of work rather than any sinister motivation behind two of her best loved characters.

It is perhaps to be expected that an element of male stereotyping peppers the dialogue. Making jokes at women's expense and treating sexual harassment as not serious arguably contributes to its persistence. Montemurro considers writers "frequently use gender as material in work-based sitcoms and this functions to maintain men's power [by] perpetuating women as subordinates" (441). In 'monday'[31] Tony's sexist outlook is reinforced when he blatantly undermines Bren as she queries the missing granary torpedoes with the breadman. Tony removes the docket from her and signs it without looking. Yet the women themselves perpetuate the *status quo:* in 'nightshift'[32] rebellion and near-disaster follow Tony's replacement by Nicola, a butch lesbian cliché with cropped hair and a domineering attitude. Nicola's response to interruption – telling Jean to "button it" – is neatly foreshadowed when she overheard a male customer's comment on Jean's bust. The women counter with indignation and mutiny until Tony's return saves the day. Maintaining the comedic trope, he soothes Jean, saying "I like a blouse as much as the next sex addict but put your tabard on and get your dumplings off the menu". He is welcomed into the bosom of his family with indulgent smiles all round.

"Just because you went to a tuppeny ha'penny public school, Wilson!"[33]: the dialogue of class consciousness as a recurring theme in *Dad's Army*.

Class consciousness has ever been a mainstay of British comedy. When writers make a character speak, they "do more than sketch conflict between middle and working classes" (Raban 81). The different levels of dialogue represent "the social hierarchy of Walmington-on-Sea where everyone knows their place" (Nelsen). Except Captain Mainwaring. Whilst the platoon wrestles with current mindless task, it is the class friction between their commanding officer and the greengrocer, vicar or Captain Square that is the focus of the humour. Motivated by a need to belie his humble origins, Mainwaring battles to enhance his status, "the degree of deference, esteem and power to influence others" and keep the lower echelon down (Ridgeway 160). In 'War Dance'[34] Pike wishes to marry; Mainwaring objects on the grounds that his intended works in the fishmongers and advises Pike his prospects at the bank will suffer. Yet when Jonesy announces he has proposed to Mrs Fox in 'Never too

Old'[35] Mainwaring is pleased "because they are the same class", evoking the response:

> Wilson: Do you really think class matters, Sir?
> Mainwaring: No question at all. It's families that make the trouble. I had to contend with all sorts of snobbish rubbish when I married Elizabeth.

Conveyed through the medium of dialogue, this undercurrent of class in 1940s England shores up the plot and creates a basic overarching narrative for the series without detracting from the humour and cross-generational appeal. A generation later, despite the great strides that comedy had taken toward inclusion and improvisation, the subjects of gender and status still provide writers with material, proving that some differences, such as the battle of the sexes and the triumph of the working man over his betters, were, and are, evergreen. Thirty years separate *Dad's Army* and *dinnerladies* but it seems some things never change.

"It was never like this at the Café Bon-Bon"[36]: the dialogue of the class divide

Without detracting from the machine-gun rattle of the gags, dialogue is at the forefront of establishing the conflict, revolving around the perceived north/south hierarchy. The factory staff are northern and working class, the professionals southern and middle class whilst the factory owner is Mr Michael, the use of his first name an affectation of the upper classes.

The "context of dialogue is important in determining what someone means by their speech" (Culpepper 94). Like Captain Mainwaring, Dolly Bellfield's social pretension is conveyed through her dialogue, reinforced by body language. Typical of the depiction of working-class marriages in fiction, there is a "struggle for the breeches" in which she robs husband Bob "of manly control" (A. Clark 1). Her City and Guilds catering qualification is wielded like a cake-knife, she "favours the full curtsey" and her sights are set on retiring to Mobberley. Her "aspirations to higher socioeconomic status is reflected in an obsession with controlling her weight" to the extent she

regularly carries scales under one arm (McClaren 33). Dolly's exchanges with best friend Jean are superficially the use of sarcasm as high comedy. Even her name trips off the tongue like Tinkerbell; Jean – 'God is Gracious' – reflects her down-to-earth resignation to life's foibles. Dolly's dialogue ostensibly reveals a deep-seated sense of superiority and, conversely, insecurity. Deep down, Dolly has little control over her life, even her diet is easily broken. Her class consciousness extends to her choice of perfume; scorning Jean's 'Charlie' for her own 'Youth Dew'.

Similarly, Petula's comedic appearance in an episode is a display of status. When Petula reminisces about a far-fetched memory, she will interrupt herself; "Oh, no, you weren't there", defying Bren to contradict her, safe in the knowledge that Bren cannot. The implied meaning suggests Bren is of lower status in their relationship.

Dad's Army titles feature flags, countries, national pride. It tells the viewer that the Home Guard is part of something bigger. Like a statement made in uppercase, it draws attention to itself. This is the opposite of the setting for *dinnerladies.* Wood is adamant that her only sitcom is titled in Carolingian minuscules – entirely in lowercase (dinnerladies: first helpings 7). In the '90s this is considered the font of digitally literate, forward-thinking young professionals. But the canteen is not central to corporate mission statements; the workers are women with caring responsibilities, uneducated, nearing retirement or of ethnic origin. Earning minimum wage, they are considered insignificant. This is perhaps Wood's way of showing exactly that. Yet the dialogue infers they are plucky, determined characters that make the kitchen the beating heart of the factory, they pull together when the chips are down, literally. In the final episode, the factory closes, and the comrades are scattered to the four winds yet twenty years on, *dinnerladies* retains a place in the annuls of British comedy classics. After all, an army marches on its stomach.

Conclusion.

My study shows the humorous novel has much more in common with a sitcom than would be first imagined. The creative element of this submission is a humorous hen-lit novel, *Broads*. The narrative opens in a failing high school back in 1991 when a substantial sum of money disappears from the safe: the culprit is never found. Twenty-five years later, four former pupils rekindle their friendship aboard a decrepit narrowboat on the Norfolk Broads. They get much more than they bargained for; skeletons that festered in cupboards for many years are revealed as the journey progresses, slowly and inexorably. Nobody's life will ever be the same …

The first draft was a series of vignettes where the dialogue was more important than what was happening around the protagonists and when or where the action was taking place. There was minimal setting, no over-arching plot and little distinction between the voices. Peer review suggested *Broads* could not be a novel but had promise as a sitcom, where physical performance and scenery would compensate for the lack of descriptive writing. This logic was further justified by the main body of the narrative being divided into days, making the work seem episodic.

I felt that utilizing the techniques employed in the sitcoms I had studied would allow me to overcome the complexity of creating multiple principals in several locations, with a quarter of a century separating the exposition from the rising action without expending the majority of the notional wordcount of a novel. As a potential solution I considered reducing the boating party to three, à la Jerome, but found it lacked the tension created by the crush of humanity in a confined space and lost the dynamic needed to keep the dialogue epigrammatical and snappy. A further consideration for using dialogue as a medium would be the engagement of the inner voice to facilitate the reader's immersion in the narrative as she "looks down a pillar of text to find dialogue on the page … it attracts the eye and… advances the story" (R. Clark 128).

In *dinnerladies*, Wood uses succinct dialogue to paint a picture of her characters. If I could emulate her technique, I could create three-dimensional, rounded characters for my novel "because it is the plight of the specific, flawed, fascinating individual that makes us care what happens to them" (Storr 5). I could reinforce the hierarchy of the group as well as show shifts of power within the dynamic - provided that more than merely conversation, the dialogue was a source of critical information. Like *Dad's Army, Broads* places the protagonists – Minty, Sam, Stella, Emma, and hanger-on Bonnie – into a variety of serious situations; the humour arises from their response, predominantly conveyed through dialogue. As in a sitcom, the intervening backstory could be limited; there need be no elaboration of the intervening years other than in reminiscence. As in *dinnerladies* the farcical and action elements could be sparse and predominantly conveyed via dialogue rather than physical comedy: when five people are aboard a narrowboat, privacy is at a premium and dialogue is unavoidable.

Wood uses the delivery of dialogue to reveal state of mind and inner conflict; I employ a similar technique in *Broads*. Stella, twice divorced, tells the reader her story in two conversations. Early in the narrative, when the initial impression of Stella is that of a cold-hearted go-getter, she light-heartedly relates an exasperating incident in a loveless marriage over a glass of champagne. Later, when she confesses to her despair over her split from soulmate Alex, every word is pulled from her mouth like a rotted tooth from a recalcitrant socket, anaesthetised with malt whisky. I have aimed for a reciprocity between the dialogue and the narrative to immerse the reader and thereby understand the psyche of the character.

From my study of dialogue, I realise the key to writing humour is believable, realistic characters that speak with an authentic voice. Writing for laughs is an organic process, a living entity that grows and develops. Dialogue breathes a spark of life into my characters long before their journey along the River Waveney begins. In the initial stage there was a lack of distinction between five principals, of identical sex, age, background, and demographic. Eventually one voice emerged, the gloomy outsider, Bonnie. I could now

assign dialogue to the other four. Knowing how each would speak as they reacted to Bonnie allowed me to develop them as individuals. This method of is challenging and, I have since learned, the exact opposite of how most comedy writers approach the problem. However, once I had achieved consistency of voice, I could switch between drama and comedy without incongruity, allowing me to seamlessly include humour to break up tension and vice versa. In the same way I could introduce and modulate conflict even within the limited hierarchy aboard the boat.

Having conveyed a great deal of information about my characters via dialogue gave me the space to dedicate wordage to the development of an over-arching plot. Like a sitcom, the series creates the drama, the episode, the comedy. The purely humorous novel arguably exists to make the reader laugh but many have "an air of inevitability that permeates their plots… and are intuitively and almost invariably considered low-class literature" (Galines). This is not my objective. As my plot develops therefore, I engineer a metamorphism from slapstick to 'tragicomedy', merging humour with drama to reflect the dual nature of reality, where both modes co-exist simultaneously. Foster describes it as "the basic pattern of human existence … the individual's experience of life's daily ups and downs" (11). By maintaining the speech patterns of the characters, I aim to achieve constancy when switching between dramatic revelations and comedy scenes that may jar written in pure narrative.

Although not strictly a 'whodunnit', there is an element of intrigue in *Broads* that requires salient plot-points to be withheld. In a sitcom the audience is not usually party to the character's thoughts so giving Minty the power to manipulate the conversation disguises – or alerts the reader to – red herrings and machinations of the plot without a full reveal. Dialogue did not give access to her inner thoughts and therefore force my hand to release as much knowledge as the culprit has herself. The alternative, an unreliable narrator, would deliberately confuse the reader by creating fiction within fiction. Although this was successfully achieved in Flynn's *Gone Girl*, I felt that as my narrative jumps twenty-five years and deals with each woman's personal problems and secrets, this would be too confusing. Dialogue proves to be the ultimate solution to retaining attention by giving the reader subtle

hints to the twists in the plot; when Minty finally confesses the truth to her companions, I want it to be to be met with surprise, not incredulity.

The need for conflict to drive the dramatic element meant including unpleasant or sensitive topics with potential to derail the humorous intent. Narrative would give the incidents too much weight and slow the pace by bogging the reader down in the opening chapters. When Petula passes in *dinnerladies,* Bren sees her final moments with distance, taking the immediacy away from the encounter. In similar fashion, I relate the inciting incidents as articles in the local newspaper thus reconciling plot and tone using dialogue as humorous quotes via inexcusably rotten journalism.

Dad's Army inspired me include running gags; as Hodges invariably ends up wet, so my ladies wake up each morning to Sam's obsessive maintenance of her vocal chords and, like the appearance of Petula in *dinnerladies,* I hope my reader will eagerly anticipate the others reactions. In similar fashion, I trust the sight-gag of Bonnie's headtorch will not need explaining.

Once the dialogue was authentic, I was able to continue the narrative without resorting to the use of catchphrases as identifiers. The dialogue and speech patterns of the five women also allowed me to portray how, although they had much in common at the outset, their lifestyles had altered their way of speaking. This conveniently allowed them not to converse phonetically. Whilst there is little room for sensitivity in the use of dialect and idioms in situation comedy, this quickly becomes tiresome to write and read. The South Wales valley brogue is distinctive in dropping the aitch at the beginning of words and the gee at the end of gerunds etc. However, as Wood does, I make use of accents for cameo characters such as Old Mr Roe, the dialect of the comic proletarian for Stella's mother and patois for Bonnie's father, Dirty Dai. Repetition is a powerful comedic tool; as Wood reprocesses set pieces, I repeat the mistakes made in tying up boat on three occasions, although the third was mere speculation; like Elizabeth Mainwaring, it was more powerful when it remained unseen. The same applies to the difficult conversations Stella and Sam resolve to have with their respective parents toward the end of the novel. In *Dad's Army* the real enemy is notable by its absence. I considered that at this stage of the novel, the characters of Sam and Stella were firmly

established, and readers could be entrusted to use their imaginations to create their happy-ever-afters. This would comply with the trope without being insincere.

Although both follow Freytag's Pyramid, unlike a sitcom in which props and a set or location visually obviate the need to set the scene, a novel must immerse the reader in the narrative and create a spirit of place via descriptive writing.

My novel is one of two halves – the first, in essence the exposition that culminates in the inciting incident, like *dinnerladies* is static, set in real time and geographic location but in a fictional place of work. Like *Dad's Army*, it is set in the past but concentrates on humour rather than historical accuracy. Using an actual location from my past allowed me to trust my reader to have roughly similar experience to visualise the school in their mind's eye; *ergo*, I could make dialogue the driver of the scene as sitcoms do. Like HDW Components probably does, the school exists, a stone's throw from where I sit; I had to change the names. The second half, containing the rising action, the climax, the resolution, and the denouement is mobile, the setting changes as the protagonists journey to Norfolk and set off on their adventure. This posed different problems: the location is not only real but a destination for over seven million visitors a year, all of them waiting to point out inaccuracies. This required a great deal of research, more than one would imagine is required for a sitcom where location shots suffice throughout. Subsequently, as its importance increases, so does the proportion of descriptive writing, so does the proportion of description increase exponentially.

Closer in, the characters paint a picture of their craft *The Broads Princess* through their complaints about her shortcomings. Period is established by Sam's intertextual quotations from musical theatre and there is a plethora of allusions to film, pop music and cinema. The women discuss who will play them if Minty's embryo book is made into a drama: this not only engages on a thematic level with popular culture but gives an insight into the individual characters via dialogue that is otherwise difficult to convey concisely: the word count is needed for the narrative. Adding idioms and regional flavours – but to the dialogue of minor characters only – assisted this process of setting the scene.

The British sitcom, ergo the dialogue it contains, is currently under threat as never before. The BBC, historically the producer of the most iconic shows including *Only Fools and Horses* and *One Foot in the Grave*, faced a 25% budget reduction in real terms in the period 2003 – 2013 and further cutbacks are required every year (www.ofcom.org.uk). Recently this has resulted in sitcoms including award-winning *Fleabag* and dramas such as *Killing Eve* being produced by in collaboration with overseas companies such as Amazon and Netflix (www.bbc.co.uk). The dialogue is quintessentially English with little room for the idiosyncrasies and dialects we have grown to love when regional sitcoms successfully make the jump into mainstream television, such as the successful sitcom *Gavin and Stacey.* Further, the proliferation of reality TV shows on our screens is concerning since the participants provide their own dialogue with little skill or finesse required. Increasingly, American comedy penetrates the speech patterns of our population to the extent that alien phrases are now commonplace. Perhaps most damaging to the future of dialogue is the worldwide success of *Mr Bean*, a mute character tailor-made for export, produced as two ten-minute skits to accommodate three commercial breaks.

The evolution of storytelling means that motivation is now at the heart – fuelling characters that drive the plot; not a set of choices that a character must make. In the twenty-first century the mass democratisation of creative tools has vastly changed the relationship between creator and audience – code, data and algorithms abound. New technology and social platforms may change the way stories are told but there will always be a fundamental need for characters, and there is no better way to spark life into them than by putting words into their mouths.

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